

Many strings to her bow

Garth Cartwright talks to fiddling phenomenon Máiréad Nesbitt about her debut album.

Máiréad Nesbitt has played in front of huge audiences across the globe but, until now, remains largely unknown.

How come? Nesbitt's globe-trotting has been as lead fiddler in Michael Flatley's world-wide hit show Lord of the Dance. And while knocking off jigs and reels for Flatley to skip to certainly pays the mortgage, Nesbitt has chosen to step out front with her debut solo album Raining Up (Vertical).

Raining Up is an album of considerable beauty and shows Nesbitt with one foot in the traditional Irish music camp and another in a chill-out ambient groove. Do the two genres meet on equal ground? Indeed they do with Nesbitt proving as sure-footed in bringing Irish fiddling into the 21st Century as she is in knocking off a traditional reel.

To those who know Nesbitt this is unsurprising. A former All-Ireland fiddle champion, Tipperary-born Máiréad started playing piano at four and fiddle at six. She trained classically in Waterford, Cork and London and began her professional career with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra. Five years with Lord of the Dance followed, which included three world tours. Right now Nesbitt is based at home in Wicklow and enjoying the peace and quiet after an exhausting 2001.

"I only had two weeks off last year! I was constantly on the road with Lord of the Dance and another show Michael Flatley has in America so it's very nice to have left that behind. The album was recorded before that and took a year to release as I couldn't concentrate on LOTD and the album. It had to be one or the other and now I'm interested in seeing where I can take the album.

To say Nesbitt grew up in a musical family is an understatement. Both her parents are professional musicians (and music teachers), her sister a professional violinist, her younger brother a sound engineer and multi-instrumentalist, while her two other brothers [two of her other brothers] also play.

Nesbitt has her mum, sister and brothers on the album: was it enjoyable or stressful making Raining Up?

"I really enjoyed making the album although I didn't enjoy organising the whole thing. The producers were very, very helpful. Even before they came on board there was a huge amount of organisation -- I remember being in South Africa and being on the phone all the time trying to arrange the sessions. I wouldn't do that again -- someone else can do it next time."

Nesbitt grew up playing both classical violin and traditional fiddle. Few musicians

manage to master both but she certainly did.

"My family have always played both. The difficulties of classical musicians is they can't improvise so their ear isn't developed. Which is a real pity, I think. So I consciously made the effort to split off the two techniques -- my classical teacher at the time didn't agree, and said 'it'll ruin your technique' but I was determined. There are only a handful of players that can do both. Classical players have to read everything -- they don't learn from playing the music. I put the benefits of playing the two styles together -- traditional musicians often don't like the vibrato or the violin techniques of classical but I've brought that in. But I don't mess it up too much -- I respect them both."

Raining Up is an interesting mix of old and new styles. Nesbitt claims the sound came together naturally in the studio.

"It wasn't a conscious decision but then people began saying to me: 'It's all a bit different, isn't it?' and I had to agree. I'm getting really positive feedback from my mother and people like that who love traditional music. I'm very careful to keep in the mood of a tune and then the backing can be funky."

And what does the title Raining Up stand for?

"My brother Karl wrote that track. It's about the Moher cliffs, they're absolutely beautiful, and at times you can see an evaporation of water up into the sky. So that's what he calls Raining Up."

And with that the delightful Máiréad Nesbitt laughs and announces the sun is shining across Wicklow and she wants to go for a walk along the coast. Lord of the Dance was, she recalls, hard partying and burn out. Raining Up is about taking life a little easier.

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